

THE GAZETTE.

FRIDAY MORNING, JANUARY 14, 1859.

STRANGE FEARS OF A MILLIONAIRE.

William Beckford, one of the most remarkable men of modern times, when his only son was only ten years of age, bequeathed him West Indian and other property which yielded an income equal to half a million dollars a year. Young Beckford's mental powers were good, and no pains were spared in cultivating them by a refined education. Sir William Chambers instructed him in architecture while the great Mozart taught him music. At twenty-one, with the income of a Prince, and accumulations in ready money to the amount of about a million sterling (five million dollars), he launched upon the world. The great talent of human happiness was placed within his reach; but he threw the golden opportunity away. Proud and haughty, the youthful Beckford withdrew from the active business of life, and retiring to Portugal, there devoted himself to a life of luxurious ease. The first outlay of his wealth there was in the erection of a gorgeous palace.

During his residence in Portugal, he visited, under the royal sanction, some of the wealthy and luxurious monasteries of that country. It is difficult to convey an idea of the pomp and splendor of this journey, which resembled more the cavalcade of an eastern prince than the tour of a private individual.

"Everything," he himself says, "that could be thought or dreamed of, for our convenience or relaxation, was carried in our train—nothing was to be left behind but cure and sorrow."

"The ceiling of my apartment in the monastery," he adds, "was gilded and painted, the floor spread with Persian carpets of the finest texture, the tables decked with superb ewers and basins of chased silver."

The kitchen in which the dinner was prepared is thus described: "A stream of water flowed through it, from which were formed reservoirs containing every kind of river fish. On one side were heaped up loads of game and venison; on the other side, were vegetables and fruits in endless variety. Beyond a long line of stores extended a row of ovens, and close to the hillocks of wheaten flour, finer than snow, blocks of sugar, jars of the purest oil, and pastry in various abundance."

The dinner which followed these preparations was served in a magnificent saloon covered with pictures, and lighted up with a profusion of wax tapers in sconces of silver. "The banquet," he adds, "consisted of rarities and delicacies of every season from distant countries." Confectionary and fruits awaited the party in a room on the second floor, where were ranged a row of ovens, and the rarest and most fragrant spices, were handed round. Such was Beckford's mode of life during this journey.

Returning at the commencement of the present century, to his native country, Beckford again abandoned himself to the selfish enjoyment of his wealth. Taking a capricious dislike to a splendid mansion on his estate, which had been erected by his father at a cost of one million four hundred thousand dollars, he ordered it to be pulled down. He resolved that phoenix like, which should arise from its ruins, a more magnificent structure, surpassing in magnificence all that had hitherto been known in English art. Fonthill Abbey, one of the wonders of the West of England was the result of this determination. Whole galleries of that vast pile were erected solely for the purpose of enabling Beckford to embellish on their windows the crests of the families from whom he boasted his descent. The wonder of the fabric, however, was a tower of colossal dimensions and great height, erected somewhat in the manner and spirit of those who once reared a similar structure on the plains of Shinar. "Go to, let us build us a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name."

To complete the erection of Beckford's tower, 400 men were employed, both night and day, through an entire winter, the torches used by the nocturnal workmen being visible to the astonished travellers at miles distant. Beckford's principal enjoyment was watching the erection of this structure. At nightfall he would repair to some elevated part of his grounds and there in solitude would feast his senses for hours with the singular spectacle presented by the dancing of the lights, and the reflection of their glare on the surrounding country. The building was indeed Beckford's idol—the object for which he lived. He devoted the whole of his energies to make it realize the most fascinating visions of a vain imagination. The tower was finally erected, but, as might have been expected, the mortar and cement used had no time to set properly, ere a violent gale of wind brought the vast structure to the ground. Merely remarking that he should have been glad to witness the sublime fall of such a mass of materials, he gave orders for the erection of another tower of 270 feet in height, but this also fell in 1835.

After the completion of the Abbey, Beckford's conduct was still more extraordinary. A wall, nearly two miles in circumference, surrounded his mansion, and within this circle no unauthorized visitors were allowed to pass. In sullen grandeur he dwelt alone, shunning converse with the whole world. Majesty itself was desirous of visiting this wonderful domain, but was refused admittance. Strangers would disguise themselves as servants, as peasants, as pedlars, in the hope of catching a glimpse of his glories. Nor was it without a wealth of curiosity. "Gold and silver vases and cups," there.

Such was Beckford of Fonthill. With an income of more than £100,000 per annum, he seemed almost to have retired into a solitude, and to have renounced the world. A sudden depreciation of West Indian property took place. Some lawsuits terminated unfavorably, embarrassments poured in like a flood on the princely owner. The gates which had refused admittance to a monarch, were suddenly thrust open by a sheriff's officer. The mansion erected at so vast an expense was sold. The greater part of its costly treasures was scattered by the hammer of the auctioneer; and Beckford, driven, with the shattered fragments of his fortune, to spend a solitary old age in a watering place, there to feel how the instability of the retrospect of neglected talents can give, and to point out the old moral of the vanity of human affairs. He fell ill and died unattended by any. The tower which he had erected at so great an expense fell to the ground, and Fonthill Abbey was pulled down by its new owner. Thus melted away like a frost-work before the sun, the extravagant productions of a man of wealth. His whole life had been a sad misapplication of the talents committed to his care, and in the end he discovered that he had been cheated by his imagination.

Beckford's princely lavishness caused him to be talked about all over the world, his true claim to remembrance rests upon his talents as an author, and his genius as displayed in the wild and singular Oriental tale of "Vathek."

1859. COUNTING-HOUSE CALENDAR. 1859.

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